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ABSTRACT

Basic information that teachers of English as a second language should know about Indochinese refugees, including the identification of different ethnic or regional groups and characteristics of four Indochinese languages, is presented. Indochinese refugees come from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The five major groups of people are unrelated ethnically and linguistically and the cultural differences are significant. Historically, the major cultural forces that influenced the region were the Indian in Cambodia and Laos and the Chinese in Vietnam. Historical influences in the Indochinese countries are briefly traced, and the refugee situation in these countries is examined. A few generalizations about cultural characteristics of the Indochinese and information about assimilation problems are considered. To assist the teacher of English in multiethnic classes, information is presented on: (1) which refugees can communicate with each other and which groups are compatible, (2) naming systems and pronunciation of names, (3) the languages of the five major groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian) and the significant differences among them in phonetics and grammar. Information is presented on phonetics, tone, alphabets, grammar, and lexicon/semantics. Publications that give detailed analyses of the various languages are identified. (SW)

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INDOCHINESE REFUGEES:
CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC INSIGHTS

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The purpose of this paper is to present some of the basic information that teachers should know about the Indochinese refugees. The first part is an identification of the various peoples and an examination of some pertinent cultural considerations. The second part is an analysis of some of the general characteristics of four Indochinese languages, to give teachers an idea of how students are thinking and of the interference of the native language on their learning English.

I. BACKGROUND FACTORS

The Indochinese refugees come from three countries: Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. There are dozens of distinct ethnic or regional groups among the populations of these countries. We consider these to be the major five: from Vietnam come ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese; from Laos the ethnic Lao (Laotian) and the Hmong; and the Cambodians (Khmer) from Cambodia. Other groups are the Mien (Yao - related to the Hmong), the Lue, the Lao Theung (Kha or Khammu),

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and the Thai Dam from Laos; and Chinese from Cambodia, who are usually Teochiu rather than the Cantonese predominant in Vietnam. The five main groups are unrelated ethnically and linguistically, and there are significant cultural differences. As of July, 1981, there were 514,615 Indochinese refugees in the United States, of whom 177,005 or 34.4% were in California. At present some 10,500 new arrivals are being resettled in this country each month, coming primarily through the new Refugee Processing Centers in Galang, Indonesia and Bataan, Philippines.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The name Indochina reflects the major cultural forces which influenced the region: the Indian, in Cambodia and Laos, and the Chinese in Vietnam. The Khmer people gained early ascendancy on the peninsula, and developed a large empire which flourished from 800 to 1400 and included portions of what are now Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The glories of the past, embodied in the temples of Angkor Wat, are still cherished by all Cambodians. The empire was later humbled by the Vietnamese and the Thai.

The Vietnamese people moved southward out of southern China some 2000 years ago, fell under Chinese domination for 1000 years, then grew in strength and expanded southward at the expense of the Khmer. Vietnam split into northern and southern kingdoms; dialectal differences still exist. Cultural influence from China was great.

The Lao are sister people to the Thai, moving out of south central China into northern Indochina about 800 years ago. Around 1400 a Lao kingdom emerged, which later came under the control of Thailand.

The Hmong are the most recent arrivals in Southeast Asia. From a homeland somewhere in central China, the Hmong have over the centuries moved southward to escape persecution. Millions yet live in southern China. About 150 years ago many others began settling the mountaintops of northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. There are several subgroups of Hmong, with minor dialectal differences. The Mien are another of the Lao hill tribes, also emigrants from China.

The 19th century brought colonialism under France. Vietnam fared better during the 100 year domination than did the other countries, seeing more active French administration and the development of schools. Not much effort was made to develop Cambodia and Laos; higher education was extremely limited and was conducted in French even into the 1960's.

AS REFUGEES

The Communist advances and their victories in April 1975 prompted a flow of refugees which still continues. The most publicized of these refugees have been the "boat people," a term referring to those Vietnamese (and Chinese-Vietnamese) who leave their homeland by boat across the seas to Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and other nearby countries. They are a mixed group of people: some middle class, some merchants, some fishermen, a few professionals, and many single young men of draft age. Rarely can a family all escape at one time; usually individuals leave as they can. The first group of refugees, which left Vietnam just before the fall of the country, was quite different in character, being made up mostly of the wealthy, educated upper classes who could assimilate rather quickly into American society. There is now some limited official migration being permitted by the Vietnamese government (Orderly Departure Program). A number of refugees, both Vietnamese and Chinese, have recently been escaping from North Vietnam to Hong Kong.

As the Vietnamese constitute the largest group of refugees in the United States, the Cambodians number as the least of the major groups. The largest concentration, around 4,000, is in the Long Beach area. Many of the Cambodians are single young men, ex-soldiers or students. Recently, with the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, many city-dwellers who had been forced out into labor centers under the murderous Pol Pot regime were able to make their escape, and people of more varied and educated background are arriving here.

The Laotians apparently did not suffer the persecution that the other groups did, and their escapes did not involve such suffering and loss. Laos collapsed rather than fell, and most of the population lived close to the Thai border. Most of the refugees are ex-soldiers, with a rather low educational level. There are many complete families and also many single young men.

The Hmong escaping from Laos have had a very difficult time. They formed the "Secret Army" of the CIA, fighting the Communist Laotians and North Vietnamese in Laos for many years while the Americans were engaged in Vietnam. American support ended with withdrawal from Southeast Asia, and the Communists began a persecution of the Hmong which continues today. Many thousands have undertaken long marches from their mountain villages through the jungles trying to reach Thailand, suffering heavy losses along the way. Almost all the Hmong men were soldiers; few had any schooling, and many of the people are completely illiterate. The largest concen-

trations of Hmong are in Santa Ana and in Minneapolis/St. Paul, with around 10,000 each.

A FEW GENERALIZATIONS

Although the various Indochinese cultures have distinct differences, I would like to try to make a few generalizations about cultural characteristics. The people are normally quite adaptable, though this can depend on their background. They are grateful to the United States for accepting them, aware of the need for education and hard work, and eager to learn and to get ahead. They are cooperative, though many, especially the Vietnamese, might have definite preferences and their own ideas about their future course. They are persevering, respectful and rather reserved, with a strong sense of propriety. Religion, principally Buddhism, is very much a part of Indochinese culture, and determines philosophy and morality. The people are strongly attached to homeland and family. They generally have large families, and the extended family living in one house is common. All have relatives in their home country or in refugee camps about whom they worry constantly. Many have personal stories of great tragedy.

ASSIMILATION PROBLEMS

Assimilation of the refugees to American society depends on background, attitude, and also age -- younger people usually adapt more quickly. Normally those from urban backgrounds with more education (such as the Vietnamese and Chinese) adjust and progress more quickly, and in a short time can work, take training classes, or enroll in college. Those of the other groups, especially the Hmong and other rural folk, had limited or no schooling, and for them progress and adjustment are slow. They must also learn about living in a money economy -- about jobs, pay, handling money, buying things, budgets, and banks. The freedom of opportunity in our society is new to many refugees, and the many possibilities for the future might both encourage and bewilder.

Traditional values such as respect for age and status, parents and teachers, the strict discipline of children, the limited role of women, the restriction of male/female relations before marriage, the sense of formality and propriety in behavior, and the strong sense of community, all may be sources of cultural conflict. The loss of homeland and family, the trauma of escape, long stays in crowded refugee camps, and the new surroundings and language compound assimilation difficulties.

OTHER CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Southeast Asians do not openly express their feelings; the ubiquitous smile can appear even in times of stress or sorrow. Indochinese may not make direct eye contact when being spoken to, may be indirect about answering questions, and may tend to avoid confrontation or conflict. A certain passivity and acceptance of what is given is characteristic (though perhaps to a lesser degree among many Vietnamese and Chinese), with little tendency to challenge authority, complain, or to be the "squeaky wheel." Sex and age roles would make women in a classroom more at ease with other women, and younger and older persons uncomfortable if the younger were dominant. Touching and hand-holding in public is permitted between members of the same sex only. The head is considered the seat of the soul and should not be touched by others.

INTERCOMMUNICATION / RELATIONS

It may be useful in multiethnic classes for the teacher to know which refugees can communicate with each other, and also which groups are compatible. For example, a Laotian student might be able to communicate with a Cambodian in Thai, which virtually every Laotian can speak and which many Cambodians have picked up after spending years in Thai refugee camps. Hmong men can speak and sometimes write Lao and also speak some Thai, but virtually no Laotian speaks Hmong. Most Hmong women and old men speak only Hmong. Many Mien can speak Lao and Hmong. Few Vietnamese speak Lao or Cambodian, though some Cambodians who lived near the border with Vietnam or Laos can speak those languages. Chinese from Vietnam speak and usually write Vietnamese (usually as a second language, thus sometimes not with native fluency), though Vietnamese rarely speak Chinese. There are numerous Chinese Cambodians: they are mostly Teochiu, but can communicate with the Cantonese of Vietnam in Mandarin or another dialect. The older upper classes or well-educated from all three countries may be able to speak French, sometimes very well; but among new refugees fluent French speakers are rare, and there is little advantage to using French in the ESL classroom.

The various Indochinese groups do not necessarily get along too well with each other. Laotians, Cambodians and Hmong seem to get along very well together, but Cambodians especially may very often hold some animosity toward the Vietnamese. Chinese and Vietnamese get along, though Chinese prefer their own company. Teachers noting tensions might

use the opportunity to point out to refugee students that most Americans see them as all the same, that they will always be lumped together in schools, programs, and agencies, and that they should learn to get along with each other.

NAMING SYSTEMS

Vietnamese have first, last, and usually middle names. They give their last name first, then middle name, then first. Last names are not commonly used, people being referred to as Mr. or Mrs. or Miss and first name. Married women retain their own last name, but may be referred to as Mrs. and husband's first name. Children have the father's last name. Middle name Van is common for men. Thi for women. Common last names are Nguyen, Tran, and Le. Examples: Nguyen Van Duc, Tran Thi Huong, Le Van Duong.

Cambodians give their last name first, then perhaps a middle name (though rare), then first name. They often go by both last and first names together, or by middle and first. Married women retain their last name, but may be referred to as Mrs. and husband's first name. Examples: Pich Saroeun, Keo Chheang, Soc Kiri.

Laotians give first name first, then last name; no middle name. Last names are rarely used; some people actually have none. Married women change their last name to husband's. Names are long: Bounmy Soukbandith, Khamdanh Vilayphone, Phouvong Thammavongsa.

Hmong give their last name first, then first name. Some men have a middle name. People are often known or addressed by both names together. Married women retain their last name. Names are monosyllabic. The most common Hmong last names (or clan names) are: Chang, Chue, Fang, Her (Heu), Khang, Kue, Lor, Ly (Lee), Moua, Thao (Thor), Vang, Vue, Xiong, Yang. Examples: Yang Chang, Ly Dang, Vue Ka Neng, Moua Yang.

In each group (except Hmong) kinship terms are used extensively in addressing family and friends. People are referred to as 'big sister X,' 'aunt Y,' or 'uncle Z,' or simply as sister, aunt, or uncle according to their age and status, even if the person is not a blood relative.

Some refugees who are aware of the American system of naming may have already changed their names around accordingly, and will give their name to Americans contrary to their traditional manner.

PRONUNCIATION OF NAMES

The way Indochinese names are written or transliterated was influenced by French spelling. Thus (refer to examples of names above): 'a' is as in 'father,' 'e' as in 'cafe,' 'i' as in 'machine,' 'ou' as in 'through.' VN 'o' and 'u' are unrounded back vowels 'o' and 'u.' 'th,' 'ph,' and 'kh' represent aspirated consonants and are pronounced simply as English 't,p,k' (except VN 'ph' = 'f' and 'kh' is a velar fricative as Sp. 'j'). Final 'ch' is a palatal stop. 'nh' is a palatalized nasal, as Sp. 'n.' 'ng' represents the sound of '-ng' as in 'sing,' even when word initial. VN 'd' is pronounced as Eng. 'd'; 'd' is pronounced as 'y' (southern dialect) or 'z' (northern). 'x' is pronounced 's' in VN and Lao, 'sh' in Hmong. Diacritical marks above and below Vietnamese vowels mark vowel value and tone.

II. LANGUAGES

The languages of the five major groups (Vietnamese, Chinese, Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian) are unrelated, and significant differences exist among them in both phonetics and grammar. (See Reference section for materials on individual languages.) Some practical generalizations, however, can be made, which, while necessarily more true of some languages than of others, may be useful for classroom teachers as general reminders of the characteristics of Indochinese languages and of the influences on learners of English. Chinese shares many of the characteristics of these Indochinese languages (e.g., tone, use of classifiers) but will not be included in this analysis.

ALPHABETS

The Vietnamese use a phonetic alphabet of Roman letters developed by European missionaries in the 16th Century. Cambodian and Lao use phonetic alphabets derived from those of ancient India. They have more characters than English and the system of writing (which is left to right) is more complicated. In the 1950's missionaries devised a Roman letter alphabet for the Hmong which is extremely regular and phonetic, and marks tone by certain consonants (unpronounced) placed at the end of words. As was stated before, however, few Hmong can actually write well in this alphabet. Thus, as far as writing English goes, Vietnamese will have an advantage over many people of the other groups since they are already familiar with the alphabet.

TONE

Of the four Indochinese languages considered, only Cambodian is not tonal. A tone language is one in which the pitch at which words are pronounced can determine meaning; that is, the same syllable pronounced in a steady, rising, or falling tone can be a completely different word. English intonation can produce such variance in tone, but the meaning of the word remains the same. For example:

Where did you <u>go</u> ?	high falling
Did you <u>go</u> ?	mid rising
I <u>go</u> to school downtown.	mid
I don't want to <u>go</u> .	falling
He's going to the desert in summer? I wouldn't <u>go</u> .	low rising

If you pronounced the word 'go' from these sentences in isolation, you would have an idea of tone. The difference is that in English the word has the same meaning in every situation; in a tone language each "go" would be a different word, with different meaning.

Explaining tonal differences to students could be confusing, for it's something that they as native speakers might not be too aware of; teachers should just consider how students might be thinking if they hear different tones of intonation in English. English intonation patterns and word stresses as well should be consciously and carefully modeled.

PHONETICS

In general, the sound systems of the Indochinese languages are quite different from English; they are characterized by the following:

1. limited final consonants
2. few consonant clusters (except Cambodian)
3. contrasts between aspirated and unaspirated consonants

--this is the difference between the 't' in 'tend' and in 'extend,' or 'c' in 'cold' and 'scold,' but in these languages that difference can determine meaning.

4. contrast between long and short vowels (Lao and Cambodian only)
 - two words might differ only in the length of the vowel: 'a' to 'aa' or 'i; to 'ii,' something like the 'a' sound in 'have' compared to the slightly longer one in 'halve'
5. unrounded as well as rounded back vowels (VN and Lao; Cambodian and Hmong have a mid/back /i/
 - like an 'o' or 'u' pronounced with the lips flat rather than rounded
6. a more tense articulation than English, with the mouth rather closed
7. different stress and intonation than English: in Lao and Cambodian syllables are more equally stressed and vowels are pronounced with full value, compared to English heavy stress on accented syllables; the tones of Hmong and Vietnamese are very pronounced and produce an uneven sentence intonation.

GRAMMAR

1. The English verb 'be' is not readily transferrable to the Indochinese languages:
 - a) generally, it is used with a predicate noun and not used with a predicate adjective:
 - e.g. I am a student but: I cold
 - b) a different verb is used for the meaning of location
 - c) 'be' is not used in such expressions as 'Are you married/finished/ready?'
 - Thus English "be" is likely to be a point of confusion; it will not be put in where needed, and put in where not needed (He sick; I am have a watch). A brief grammatical explanation to the students (in the native language if possible) might help in such cases.
2. Pronouns
 - a) Pronouns may often be omitted in informal conversation:
 - 'Where are you going?' amounts to 'Go where?'; answer 'Go store.'

- b) In direct address as well as in third person, a person's name or title (sister, teacher), or title and name are commonly used; for example: 'Teacher tired?' (=Are you tired?)
- c) Pronouns or words of address used will usually depend on the social relationship of the speaker to the person spoken to or about. There are general pronouns, but there is no distinction between 'he' and 'she' and in some languages 'they.' The lack in English of a means of expressing personal relationship or respect in address (everyone is simply 'you') may actually hinder Indochinese learners of English, since they may feel uncomfortable at first using a general informal word for everyone. The manner of address in English should be explained.
3. Yes / No responses often consist of repeating a question word:
- | | | |
|------|--|---------|
| e.g. | Are you cold? | -Cold. |
| | Do you want some coffee | -Want |
| | Did you study English in your country? | -Study. |
| | Can you drive? | -Can. |
4. Negative questions are answered differently than in English:
- 'Don't you have a car?' -- person having no car replies, 'Yes,' meaning 'Yes, that's right, I don't have a car.'
- 'Aren't you married?' or 'Oh, you're not married?' could get the reply, 'Yes, I'm not married.'
5. Though all these languages are Subject-Verb-Object in sentence order, as is English, many structures may be quite different from English. For example:
- a) the who word is in most cases at the end of the sentence:
- | |
|------------------------------------|
| He is who? |
| You go where? |
| You name what? |
| That car who? (Whose car is that?) |

- b) there is no inversion of subject and verb in question formations, and no use of auxiliary verbs such as Eng. 'do'
- c) adjectives follow noun: car big, hair long (also: good very) Thus be sure to explain a structure word for word (in the native language if possible) at least the first time, especially at beginning levels, so that students can understand the position of words and be able to extrapolate from learned patterns.

6. Questions are usually formed by placing a marker word at the end of a sentence. In Lao and Vietnamese the marker is placed directly before the verb to form the negative. For example:

Lao	aahaan sep	(the) food (is) good
	aahaan sep <u>bo</u>	is the food good?
	aahaan <u>bo</u> sep	the food is not good

Cambodian has a marker before the verb and one at the end of the sentence in the question; two are also used in the negative formation. Hmong places one marker before the verb in the question and a different one before the verb for the negative:

Hmong	koj mua	you have
	koj pua mua	do you have?
	koj tsis mua	you don't have

There are other common types of question formations as well. One uses a word such as 'yet' at the end of the sentence, another a reaffirming sort of 'is that right?'

- 7. Tense is not as inherent a feature of the Indo-chinese languages as it is of English. Verbs are not inflected. There are marker words placed before verbs to express tenses (usually only past, continuous, and future), but they may be omitted in informal conversation if the time context is clear. Thus the same words in Lao 'chau paj saj' -- 'you go where,' might translate as 'Where did you go?' or 'Where are you going?' or 'Where are you going to go?' depending on the time context of the situation, which may be denoted by time words such as

8. The expression 'there is/are' is expressed by using the verb 'have,' without a subject (as Portuguese 'tem'):

(have-many-people-very)

- my house: house (POS) I, or: house I

- ```
tell I (=tell me); house I (=my house);
house friend (=friend's house); two house or
house two
```

13. Classifiers are used in the four languages, as in most Asian languages. These are often compared in English to words like 'piece' or 'glass' in such structures as 'a glass of milk' and 'two pieces of bread,' in that they must be used with certain categories of nouns in certain circumstances; the whole idea is, however, quite foreign to English. Their manner of usage varies widely; a few examples of typical constructions are:

how many cars: how many + (CL) + car  
—two (of them: two + (CL)

The use of classifiers is best understood in learning a bit of one of the languages. As hard as knowing where and how to use them is learning which of the many classifiers to use for what objects: flat things, utensils, rooms, animals, food items, general inanimate things, etc. Since they are used in such common expressions in these languages, one can imagine how their absence in English might confuse beginning level Indochinese students.

### LEXICON / SEMANTICS

Any particular word in one language may have several different translations in another, as one language is either more specific or reflects a different perception than the other. Lao and Vietnamese, for example, each commonly uses one word for the English meanings 'live,' 'stay,' and 'be' (location). All the languages have two words for English 'good,' one word for general purposes and one for food. For 'old' and 'short,' Lao has one word for animate objects, one for inanimate objects. All the languages will have two words for sister or brother: one for older, one for younger. The system of family terms is much more complicated than in English, with age relationships an important factor.

### IN CLOSING

The above analysis of the Indochinese languages points out some of the difficulties that learners of English will experience. Bilingual aides, resource persons, and students as well can be of assistance to teachers in identifying areas of confusion. A good general rule is not to assume that anything is transferrable from English to the native language. Students will not necessarily make quick and correct inferences about English structures.

May this paper stimulate teachers to actually study one or more of the Indochinese languages; only then can they truly appreciate the struggle it is for the refugees to learn English. Take note, those of you who expect so much so fast from your students; you, college graduates, language specialists, who give up even trying to pronounce the students' names in a recognizable manner! See how many times you have to hear, say, repeat, write, study something before it sticks; see how you have to twist your mouth to form those strange sounds; see how people look blankly at you when you think you've said something that should be intelligible. Good luck!

## REFERENCES

Most of the data on culture and on language I have drawn from four years of close contact with Indochinese refugees and through talking to dozens of native informants. Of much help were also the many publications of the National Indochinese Clearinghouse/Center for Applied Linguistics, which give detailed analyses of the various languages.

### A. Culture and Language

1. National Indochinese Clearinghouse/Center for Applied Linguistics (now English Language Resource Center).  
A Manual for Indochinese Refugee Education.  
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2. NIC General Information Series
  - #14 The Hmong Language: Sounds and Alphabets
  - #15 The Hmong Language: Sentences and Phrases
  - #18 Teaching English to Cambodian Students
  - #19 Teaching English to Speakers of Lao

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### C. Statistics

1. Mid-year Report, Department of Health & Human Services. Washington, D. C., July, 1981.
2. Office of Asian Refugees, Bureau of Refugee Affairs, Department of State. Washington, D. C., July, 1981.